

Polish THE GREAT ^ ESCAPE!

Emma Plaskett takes an unconventional trip to Poland, and discovers some bizarre delights!

Apparently, Polish is now the most commonly spoken non-native language in Britain. Learning this recently, intrigued me enough to find out just what so many Poles are leaving behind when they come here. Is there something lurking in their country they don't want us to know about?

Heading for the historic city of Szczecin, it didn't take long to realise that the Poles are very proud of their history, despite its turbulence.

There's no doubt that the Second World War left the country in a state of disarray, before it was immediately plunged into communism. The result is a nation that has been desperately trying to rebuild its economy ever since.

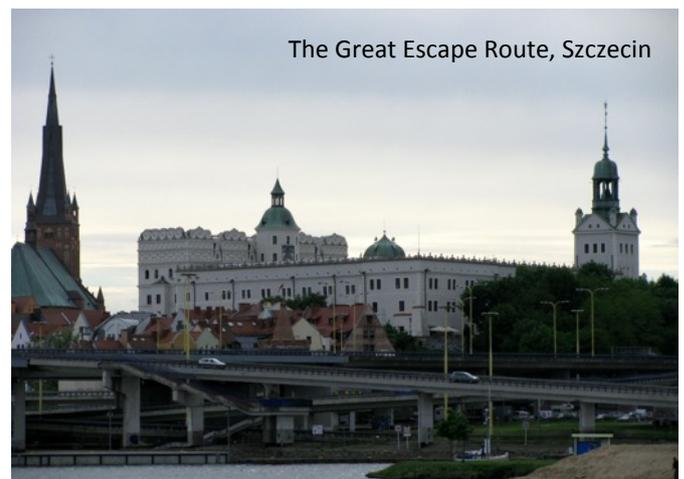
Despite the extensive bomb damage to cities such as Szczecin, the locals have made every effort to inject colour back in to the city. The post-war architecture now stands as a feature to be admired by both tourists and locals, and buildings such as the majestic Castle of the Pomeranian Duke, and the Muzeum Narodowe only serve to enhance the character of the city.

I'm not much of a history buff. I tend to rely on my husband's knowledge of memorable historical events and dates when it matters most, which, to be honest, is usually for help solving crossword puzzles. So I hadn't connected the city to an event many of us are familiar with, even though I am one of millions who relax in front of the TV at Christmas, and watch the movie of *The Great Escape*. The film depicts the story of a mass

escape by Allied Prisoners of War from a high-security German POW Camp in this region during World War II.

Of the 76 men who attempted to escape through the tunnels, named Tom, Dick and Harry, only four of them eventually made good their escape. They found themselves in Szczecin, at a brothel on the banks of the river which became their hiding place. Two were eventually arrested, but the other two successfully moved on to Sweden, before finally getting to Britain.

I met one man who is determined to share the story of this successful escape to the north, and will soon be releasing a documentary film which picks up where the original *Great Escape* film left off. His heartfelt vision for reminding the world of the important role that Poland had to play in the Second World War seems to have



The Great Escape Route, Szczecin

rubbed off on the locals, to the extent that a whole museum dedicated to the Great Escape is now being built in Szczecin.

It will be yet another part of this city's history that will be reflected in a heritage of which they are justifiably proud. And as I settled in to the sumptuous Radisson Blu Hotel, I also began to reflect on the city.

It's a vibrant mix of new and old, with good transport links both externally, and internally with the efficient bus and tram network. So again, my thoughts wandered to why so many want to leave.

True, some of the 'attractions' are not to everyone's taste. Venturing underground to visit one of Hitler's bunkers provides a chilling step back in time, and is not the kind of adventure you'll forget in a hurry. But above ground it's reassuring to discover that over a quarter of the city consists of parks and green spaces, so there's certainly no shortage of fresh air.

A walk along the river leads to a varied selection of restaurants, including the Porto Grande which is decked out like a ship (pardon the pun), where you can sample classic Polish dishes such as Żurek, a traditional Polish soup.



World War Two Bunker, Szczecin

For a history experience that the kids can enjoy, drive an hour north to the open-air Slavs and Viking Centre in Wolin. Here you can observe how people lived 1000 years ago, learn ancient crafts such as jewellery making, sample traditional Polish food, and even don some pretty authentic Viking armour - something I found to be a disturbingly gratifying experience.

A little further north from Wolin is the coastal town of Świnoujście, where you can continue indulging in more somewhat bizarre pleasures such as receiving orders from an angry Prussian soldier at the Gerhard Fort.

It's not for everyone, but it certainly brings history to life in a very 'real' way. If the canons get too much, you can



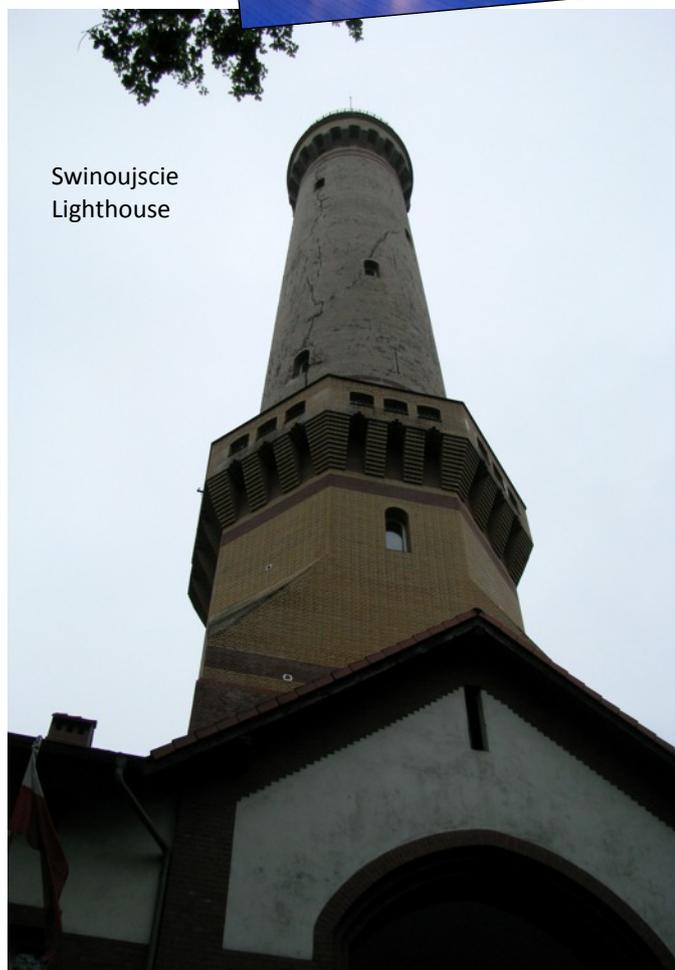
always retreat to the nearby lighthouse. If you've enough energy to climb all 300 steps, then remember to take your camera to capture the superb panoramic views of the Baltic coastline from the top.

Of course there are more relaxing reasons to visit this West Pomeranian region of Poland, and there's a great escape of a very different kind to be discovered at countless spas dotted around the area.

Poland is becoming increasingly renowned for its medi-spas, and a trip to Kołobrzeg, Poland's Spa Capital on the Baltic coast, is undoubtedly the most popular place to leave your trepidations behind.

I can't help but relish the Pole's attitude to health, where medical treatment should be enjoyed, not endured. Astoundingly, the government will actually pay up to 80% of the costs for its residents to receive their spa treatments for a range of medical purposes including respiratory, muscle, joint and sinus issues.

Although the offer isn't open to non-residents, we can still benefit from the same treatments at a fraction of the cost of UK-based spas.



Swinoujscie Lighthouse



Above: Castle of the Pomeranian Duke, Szczecin

Below: Gerhard Fort, Swinoujscie



A ninety minute direct train ride from Szczecin airport whisks you to Kołobrzeg, a particularly pleasant town which is becoming increasingly popular as a tourist destination.

Its broad tree-lined pedestrianised streets are ideal for families with children, and almost every hotel has bike hire facilities, as well as dedicated play areas for little ones. There are even children's spa treatments on offer in many places.

I was overwhelmed by the abundance of good quality entertainment for youngsters here, and it's clear that keeping the young ones entertained is a high priority in Poland.

Szczecin architecture



The high standard of hotels in Kołobrzeg is a clear indication of its up-and-coming status. The 5-star Hotel Aquarius is just one of many located just metres from the beach, and boasts outstanding spa facilities, gourmet dining, and even its own night club where you can 'bust some moves'. If dancing's not your thing, there's a line of snooker tables to keep you entertained whilst you take pleasure in watching others murder their dignity on the dance floor.

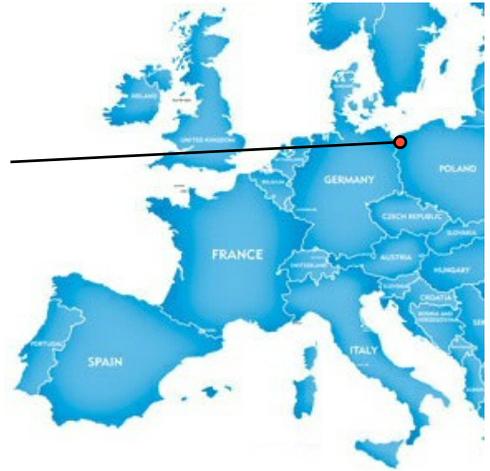
My own dignity was pretty much beaten to death when I made the effort to learn a little of the language, just to prove that we aren't all lazy when it comes to embracing other cultures. Unfortunately my 'effort' basically involved placing the letter 'y' at the end of words to make them sound more Polish. 'Can I use the toalety in your apartamenty?' doesn't get you as far as you may think.

So the next time I encounter a Pole here in the UK, whilst still mystified, I can feel honoured that they gave up virtually free spa treatments and exceptional food just to be here. Now if I could actually learn their language, I could tell them that....

The colourful Hotel Aquarius, Kolobrzeg



SZCZECIN



Treelined streets, Kolobrzeg



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The glorious riverside of Szczecin